

# Société historique du Canada - Canadian Historical Association

## The Dissertation Register

by Heather Steel

The Dissertation Register has been a project of the Canadian Historical Association since 1965, when it was started in co-operation with the Public Archives of Canada. The archives agreed to gather the information, and the CHA published the list annually. It was intended to encompass all dissertations being completed in all history departments in Canada. It included theses from other departments if they involved a degree of historical research and were of interest to the field of Canadian studies. It was to include only theses in progress, as completed dissertations were listed in a publication of the National Library. The purpose of the register was to avoid the duplication of research, and in the early stages, the editor of the list was actually supposed to contact researchers if it was clear that there was duplication of research.

Since the 1960s, the register has undergone transformation. It has been put online, which is a welcome development, as students can easily search for dissertations by author and topic. It also expanded to include completed dissertations, dissertations in progress, and abandoned dissertations. The latter was deleted from the register last year, as it was felt that it was not a useful category. The CHA has completely taken over gathering the information and publishing the list (or now, maintaining the online version). To gather the information, the CHA mails out a request to each history department in Canada, and the programme secretaries are supposed to send in the information for inclusion in the register.

Since the creation of a graduate student representative position on the CHA Council, the register has consistently been an issue. It is badly out-of-date. I have completed a master's thesis and I am in the fourth year of my dissertation, and I am nowhere to be found in the register. More shockingly, it was recently pointed out to me that I am in the American Historical Association's database, which I didn't even know existed. If this is the case, is the Dissertation Register an effective resource for graduate students?

In preparation for writing this article, I emailed the Graduate Students' Committee listserv in order to receive comments on the register. The students who re-

plied all said the register was a good idea and should not be scrapped simply because the American database exists (and is apparently more comprehensive). They argued that in theory it was essential for connecting with other students working the same area, for putting together conference panels, and for not duplicating research. The catch: the students who know about it realize it is out-of-date, and many avoid it because they know it is not going to give them the information they need.

The main problem lies in the method of gathering the information. Relying on graduate directors or programme secretaries is problematic. Some reply, some don't. In a time of increasing graduate enrolments, there is increased pressure on office staff, and submitting information voluntarily to a dissertation register may simply not be a priority. Students also have no control over the information submitted. Students often change their dissertation titles, or even their dissertation topics, along the way. Often these changes are not formally changed with the department until graduation, and thus the information submitted to the register may not be correct. Students in departments outside of history are even less likely to be included in the register.

Something needs to be done. There is no sense having, or putting effort into maintaining, a Dissertation Register that does not do what it is supposed to do. If the register is among those resources the CHA uses to attract new members, especially graduate students, it needs to be kept updated, particularly as the CHA recently voted to increase membership fees. There are a variety of measures that can be taken. More pressure should be placed on the departments to submit information, perhaps making this the specific task of the graduate student representative on council. This method, however, would not totally solve the problem. One student mentioned that she has been trying to get her department to submit her information for years, to no avail. More control should be put in the hands of the students. Students should be able to submit their own information electronically; an online form can be created on the website so that students can submit their information, or submit corrected information to

## Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

the person administering the register. The CHA website should also be making better use of the technological capacity the world now has. Why should students who are CHA members not be able to log in, change their information electronically, and immediately see the changes? If these steps were followed, the CHA's register has the potential to be just as up-to-date, if not more, than that of the AHA. Once updated, the register needs to be better promoted. A link to the register has been included in the most recent edition of *Becoming a Historian*, but it needs to be promoted on all university department websites and graduate directors should make all incoming students aware of the register during orientation, just to name a couple of ideas. Once the register is re-established as an important tool

for the graduate student community, graduate departments should be more willing to submit the information the CHA needs.

While having a link to the AHA register on the CHA website is certainly a good idea in the meantime (and even when the CHA register is updated), the students overwhelmingly argued that the CHA should not scrap the Canadian version. It would not take much more work than is already put into it to get it updated; the human labour just needs to be re-focussed on developing new methods for gathering the information, as well as on promotion, in order to again make it a resource graduate student regularly consult.

